

# **When Helping Hurts:**

## **How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself**

by

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Pages 48-116

Moody Publishers, Chicago

2014

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## INITIAL THOUGHTS

Take a few minutes to answer the following question:

*What is poverty?* Make a list of words that come to your mind when you think of poverty.



# WHAT'S THE **PROBLEM?**

## THE POOR SPEAK OUT ON POVERTY

**A**t the end of World War II, the Allies established the World Bank to finance the rebuilding of war-torn Europe. The World Bank's efforts were remarkably successful, and the European economies experienced the fastest growth in their history. Given this success, the World Bank tried a similar approach to assisting low-income countries: lending them money on generous terms to promote economic growth and poverty reduction. The results were less than stellar. Pouring in capital had worked to rebuild countries like France, but it did little to help in places like India. On the surface the problems in both places looked the same—poverty and starvation, refugees, lack of infrastructure, inadequate social services, and anemic economies—but something was different about the Majority World.

Solving the problem of poverty continues to perplex the World Bank, which remains the premier public-sector institution trying to alleviate poverty in low-income countries. Hence, during the 1990s, after decades of very mixed results, the World Bank tried a new approach. It consulted with "the true poverty experts, the poor themselves,"<sup>1</sup> by asking more than sixty thousand poor people from sixty low-income countries the basic question: what is poverty? The results of this study have been published in a three-volume series of books

called *Voices of the Poor*. Below is a small sample of the words that the poor used to describe their own situation:

For a poor person everything is terrible—illness, humiliation, shame. We are cripples; we are afraid of everything; we depend on everyone. No one needs us. We are like garbage that everyone wants to get rid of.<sup>2</sup>

— MOLDOVA

When I don't have any [food to bring my family], I borrow, mainly from neighbors and friends. I feel ashamed standing before my children when I have nothing to help feed the family. I'm not well when I'm unemployed. It's terrible.<sup>3</sup>

— GUINEA-BISSAU

During the past two years we have not celebrated any holidays with others. We cannot afford to invite anyone to our house and we feel uncomfortable visiting others without bringing a present. The lack of contact leaves one depressed, creates a constant feeling of unhappiness, and a sense of low self-esteem.<sup>4</sup>

— LATVIA

When one is poor, she has no say in public, she feels inferior. She has no food, so there is famine in her house; no clothing, and no progress in her family.<sup>5</sup>

— UGANDA

[The poor have] a feeling of powerlessness and an inability to make themselves heard.<sup>6</sup>

— CAMEROON

Your hunger is never satisfied, your thirst is never quenched; you can never sleep until you are no longer tired.<sup>7</sup>

— SENEGAL

If you are hungry, you will always be hungry; if you are poor, you will always be poor.<sup>8</sup>

— VIETNAM

What determines poverty or well-being? The indigenous people's destiny is to be poor.<sup>9</sup>

— ECUADOR

What one shouldn't lack is the sheep, what one cannot live without is food.<sup>10</sup>

— CHINA

Please take a few minutes to list some key words or phrases that you see in the quotes listed above. Do you see any differences between how you described poverty at the start of this chapter and how the poor describe their own poverty? Is there anything that surprises you?

We have conducted the previous exercise in dozens of middle-to-upper-class, predominantly Caucasian, North American churches. In the vast majority of cases, these audiences describe poverty differently than the poor in low-income countries do. While poor people mention having a lack of material things, they tend to describe their condition in far more psychological and social terms than our North American audiences. Poor people typically talk in terms of shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation, fear, hopelessness, depression, social isolation, and voicelessness. North American audiences tend to emphasize a lack of material things such as food, money, clean water, medicine, housing, etc. As will be discussed further below, this mismatch between many outsiders' perceptions of poverty and the perceptions of poor people themselves can have devastating consequences for poverty-alleviation efforts.

How do the poor in North America describe their own poverty? While there do not appear to be any comparable studies to the World Bank's survey, many observers have noted similar features of poverty in the North American context. For example, consider Cornel West, an African-American scholar, as he summarizes what many are now saying about ghetto poverty<sup>11</sup> in America:

The most basic issue now facing black America [is]: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence*. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness—though economic well-being and political clout are requisites for meaningful progress. It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to the Majority World, while there is a material dimension to poverty in the African-American ghetto, there is also a loss of meaning, purpose,

and hope that plays a major role in the poverty in North America. The problem goes well beyond the material dimension, so the solutions must go beyond the material as well.

### THE DISTINCTION IS MORE THAN ACADEMIC

Defining poverty is not simply an academic exercise, for the way we define poverty—either implicitly or explicitly—plays a major role in determining the solutions we use in our attempts to alleviate that poverty.

When a sick person goes to the doctor, the doctor could make two crucial mistakes: (1) Treating symptoms instead of the underlying illness; (2) Misdiagnosing the underlying illness and prescribing the wrong medicine. Either one of these mistakes will result in the patient not getting better and possibly getting worse. The same is true when we work with poor people. If we treat only the symptoms or if we misdiagnose the underlying problem, we will not improve their situation, and we might actually make their lives worse. And as we shall see later, we might hurt ourselves in the process.

Table 2.1 illustrates how different diagnoses of the causes of poverty lead to different poverty-alleviation strategies. For example, during the initial decade following World War II, the World Bank believed the cause of poverty was primarily a lack of material resources—the last row of table 2.1—so it poured money into Europe and the Majority World. The strategy worked in the former but not in the latter. Why? The fundamental problem in the Majority World was not a lack of material resources. The World Bank misdiagnosed the disease, and it applied the wrong medicine.

If We Believe the Primary Cause of Poverty Is . . .	Then We Will Primarily Try to . . .
A Lack of Knowledge	Educate the Poor
Oppression by Powerful People	Work for Social Justice
The Personal Sins of the Poor	Evangelize and Disciple the Poor
A Lack of Material Resources	Give Material Resources to the Poor

TABLE 2.1

Similarly, consider the familiar case of the person who comes to your church asking for help with paying an electric bill. On the surface, it appears that this person's problem is the last row of table 2.1, a lack of material resources, and many churches respond by giving this person enough money to pay the electric bill. But what if this person's fundamental problem is not having the self-discipline to keep a stable job? Simply giving this person money is treating the symptoms rather than the underlying disease and will enable him to continue with his lack of self-discipline. In this case, the gift of the money does more harm than good, and it would be better not to do anything at all than to give this handout. Really! Instead, a better—and far more costly—solution would be for your church to develop a relationship with this person, a relationship that says, "We are here to walk with you and to help you use your gifts and abilities to avoid being in this situation in the future. Let us into your life and let us work with you to determine the reason you are in this predicament."

Unfortunately, the symptoms of poor people largely look the same around the world: they do not have "sufficient" material things.<sup>13</sup> However, the underlying diseases behind those symptoms are not always very apparent and can differ from person to person. A trial-and-error process may be necessary before a proper diagnosis can be reached. Like all of us, poor people are not fully aware of all that is affecting their lives, and like all of us, poor people are not always completely honest with themselves or with others. And even after a sound diagnosis is made, it may take years to help people to overcome their problems. There will likely be lots of ups and downs in the relationship. It all sounds very time-consuming, and it is. "If you *spend yourselves* in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday" (Isa. 58:10, italics added). "Spending yourself" often involves more than giving a handout to a poor person, a handout that may very well do more harm than good.

A sound diagnosis is absolutely critical for helping poor people without hurting them. But how can we diagnose such a complex disease? Divine wisdom is necessary. Although the Bible is not a textbook on poverty alleviation, it does give us valuable insights into the nature of human beings, of history, of culture, and of God to point us in the right direction. Hence, in the remainder of this chapter and the next, we root our understanding of poverty and its



alleviation in the Bible's grand narrative: creation, the fall, and redemption. We recognize that some of the material in these two chapters is a bit abstract. Hang in there! It won't hurt too much. By design, the book moves from the theoretical to the applied. We need to establish a solid theoretical foundation if we want to build successful poverty-alleviation efforts.

## POVERTY: A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

### In the Beginning

Bryant Myers, a leading Christian development thinker, argues that in order to diagnose the disease of poverty correctly, we must consider the fundamental nature of reality, starting with the Creator of that reality. Myers notes that the triune God is inherently a relational being, existing as three-in-one from all eternity. Being made in God's image, human beings are inherently relational as well. Myers explains that before the fall, God established four foundational relationships for each person: a relationship with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation (see figure 2.1).<sup>14</sup> These relationships are the

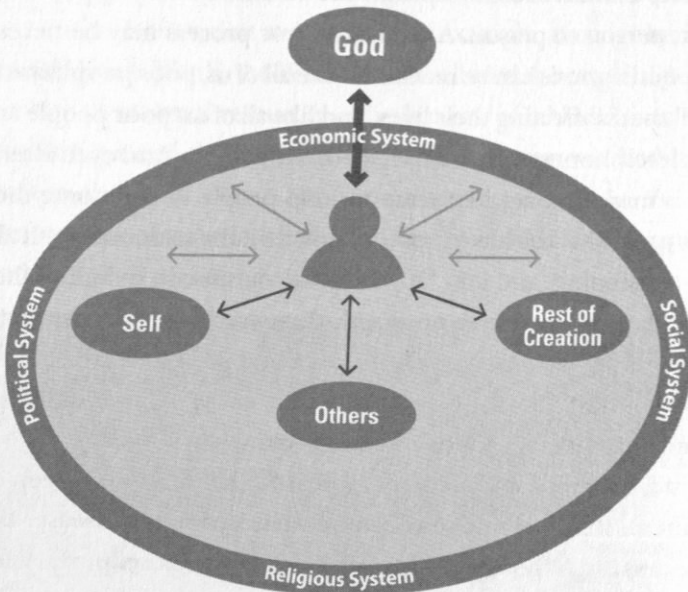


FIGURE 2.1

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

building blocks for all of life. When they are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended, because we are being what God created us to be. *In particular for our purposes, when these relationships are functioning properly, people are able to fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.*

Note that human life is not all up for grabs! God designed humans to be a certain thing and to operate in a certain way in all of these relationships:

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD:** This is our primary relationship, the other three relationships flowing out of this one. The Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches that human beings' primary purpose is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." This is our *calling*, the ultimate reason for which we were created. We were created to serve and give praise to our Creator through our thoughts, words, and actions. When we do this, we experience the presence of God as our heavenly Father and live in a joyful, intimate relationship with Him as His children.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH SELF:** People are uniquely created in the image of God and thus have inherent worth and dignity. While we must remember that we are not God, we have the high *calling* of reflecting God's being, making us superior to the rest of creation.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS:** God created us to live in loving relationship with one another. We are not islands! We are made to know one another, to love one another, and to encourage one another to use the gifts God has given to each of us to fulfill our *callings*.

- **RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REST OF CREATION:** The "cultural mandate" of Genesis 1:28–30 teaches that God created us to be stewards, people who understand, protect, subdue, and manage the world that God has created in order to preserve it and to produce bounty. Note that while God made the world "perfect," He left it "incomplete." This means that while the world was created to be without defect, God *called* humans to interact with creation, to make possibilities into realities, and to be able to sustain ourselves via the fruits of our stewardship.

The arrows pointing from human beings to the surrounding ovals in figure 2.1 highlight that these foundational relationships are the building blocks for

all of life. The way that humans create culture—including economic, social, political, and religious systems—reflect our basic commitments to God, self, others, and the rest of creation. For example, because William Wilberforce viewed “others” as being created in the image of God, he devoted his life as a politician to banning the slave trade in England at the start of the nineteenth century. Wilberforce shaped the political system in a way that reflected his fundamental commitment to love other human beings, including Africans. And the same is true of all other aspects of culture. The systems that humans create, including both formal institutions (governments, schools, businesses, churches, etc.) and cultural norms (gender roles, attitudes toward time and work, understandings of authority, etc.), reflect the nature of our foundational relationships to God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

But culture reflects more than just the expression of human effort. Consider again Colossians 1:16–17: “For by him [Jesus] *all things* were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (italics added). Note in this passage that Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of more than just the material world. His creative and sustaining hand extends to “all things.” This sustenance is continuing, even in a fallen world. Hence, Christ is actively engaged in sustaining the economic, social, political, and religious systems in which humans live. There is certainly real mystery here, but the central point of Scripture is clear: as humans engage in cultural activity, they are unpacking a creation that Christ created, sustains, and as we shall see later, redeems.

As figure 2.1 illustrates, the arrows connecting the individual to the systems point both ways. *People affect systems, and systems affect people.* For example, much of our lives are spent working in organizations that play a huge role in shaping our self-images, our relationships to coworkers, the means by which we steward creation, and the setting in which we respond to God and in which He responds to us. And these organizations operate in the context of local, national, and global systems characterized by rapid flows of information, capital, and technology, which greatly impact the scope and nature of their operations.

More than ever before, the organizations in which we work are shaped by events on the other side of the world. For example, as China’s economic



policies emerge, the entire global economy is affected. Hence, the context in which we relate to God, self, others, and the rest of creation is influenced by actions of the Chinese government!

### **What's This Stuff Good for Anyway?**

The importance of the doctrine of creation will become more evident as the book proceeds, but let's look at a few implications right away:

- The four key relationships highlight the fact that human beings are multifaceted, implying that poverty-alleviation efforts should be multifaceted as well. If we reduce human beings to being simply physical—as Western thought is prone to do—our poverty-alleviation efforts will tend to focus on material solutions. But if we remember that humans are spiritual, social, psychological, and physical beings, our poverty-alleviation efforts will be more holistic in their design and execution.

- Dirt matters, as do giraffes, wells, families, schools, music, crops, governments, and businesses. We must engage with the entire creation, including culture, for our Creator is deeply engaged with it.

- Our basic predisposition toward poor communities—including their people, organizations, institutions, and culture—should include the notion that they are part of the good world that Christ created and is sustaining. They are not *just* filth and rubble. (If you are wondering about the effects of sin, hang on until the next section.)

- We are not bringing Christ to poor communities. He has been active in these communities since the creation of the world, sustaining them “by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Hence, a significant part of working in poor communities involves discovering and appreciating what God has been doing there for a long time! This should give us a sense of humility and awe as we enter poor communities, for part of what we see there reflects the very hand of God. Of course, the residents of these communities may not recognize that God has been at work. In fact, they might not even know who God is. So part of our task may include introducing the community to who God is and to helping them to appreciate all that He has been doing for them since the creation of the world. We will return to this issue in chapter 6.

## The Fall Really Happened

Of course, the grand story of Scripture does not end with creation. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and their hearts were darkened. The Genesis account records that all four of Adam and Eve's relationships immediately became distorted: their relationship with God was damaged, as their intimacy with Him was replaced with fear; their relationship with self was marred, as Adam and Eve developed a sense of shame; their relationship with others was broken, as Adam quickly blamed Eve for their sin; and their relationship with the rest of creation became distorted, as God cursed the ground and the childbearing process.

Furthermore, as figure 2.2 illustrates, because the four relationships are the building blocks for all human activity, the effects of the fall are manifested in the economic, social, religious, and political systems that humans have created throughout history. For example, not loving "others" as they should have, politicians have passed laws institutionalizing slavery and racial discrimination. And not caring for "the rest of creation," at times shareholders have allowed their companies to pollute the environment. The systems are broken,

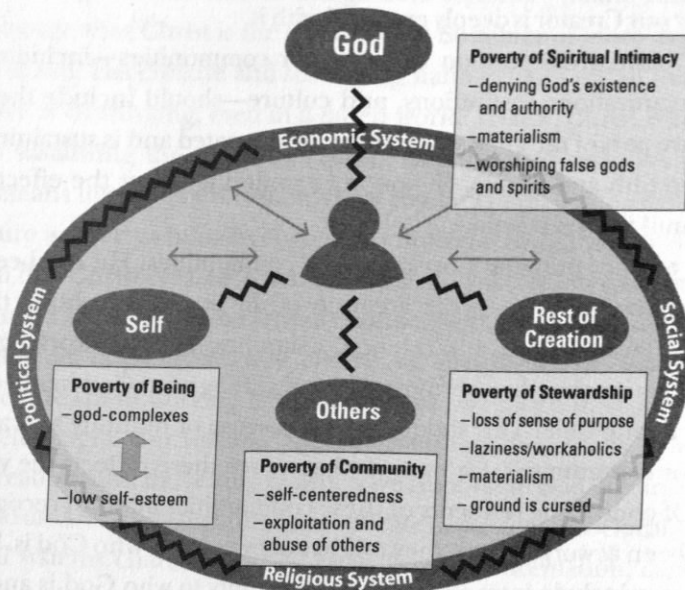


FIGURE 2.2

Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

reflecting humans' broken relationships. Moreover, in addition to sinful human natures and behaviors, Satan and his legions are at work, wreaking havoc in both the individuals and systems.

These considerations lead to Myers's description of the fundamental nature of poverty:<sup>15</sup>

**Poverty is the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable.**

**Poverty is the absence of shalom in all its meanings.**

Although Myers's definition correctly points to the all-encompassing effects of the fall, it is important to remember that neither humans nor the systems they create are as bad as they could possibly be. Christ continues to "hold all things together" and to "sustain all things by his powerful word." Hence, while the good creation—including both individuals and the systems they create—is deeply distorted, it retains some of its inherent goodness. Flowers are still pretty. A baby's smile brings joy to all who see it. People are often kind to one another. Governments build roads that enable us to get around better. Companies often pay their workers decent wages. And both poor individuals and communities continue to exhibit God-given gifts and assets.

### **WHO ARE THE POOR?**

Stop and think: If poverty is rooted in the brokenness of the foundational relationships, then who are the poor?

Due to the comprehensive nature of the fall, every human being is poor in the sense of not experiencing these four relationships in the way that God intended. As figure 2.2 illustrates, every human being is suffering from a poverty of spiritual intimacy, a poverty of being, a poverty of community, and a poverty of stewardship. We are all simply incapable of being what God created us to be and are unable to experience the fullness of joy that God designed for these relationships. Every minute since the fall, each human being is the proverbial "square peg in a round hole." We don't fit right because we were shaped for something else.

For some people the brokenness in these foundational relationships re-

sults in material poverty, that is their not having sufficient money to provide for the basic physical needs of themselves and their families. For example, consider Mary, who lives in a slum in western Kenya. As a female in a male-dominated society, Mary has been subjected to polygamy, to regular physical and verbal abuse from her husband, to fewer years of schooling than males, and to an entire cultural system that tells her that she is inferior. As a result, Mary has a poverty of being and lacks the confidence to look for a job, leading her into material poverty.

Desperate, Mary decides to be self-employed, but needs a loan to get her business started. Unfortunately, her poverty of community rears its ugly head, as the local loan shark exploits Mary, demanding an interest rate of 300 percent on her loan of twenty-five dollars, contributing to Mary's material poverty. Having no other options, Mary borrows from the loan shark and starts a business of selling homemade charcoal in the local market, along with hundreds of others just like her. The market is glutted with charcoal sellers, which keeps the prices very low. But it never even occurs to Mary to sell something else, because she does not understand that she has been given the creativity and capacity to have dominion over creation. In other words, her poverty of stewardship locks her into an unprofitable business, further contributing to her material poverty. Frustrated by her entire situation, Mary goes to the traditional healer (witch doctor) for help, a manifestation of her poverty of spiritual intimacy with the true God. The healer tells Mary that her difficult life is a result of angry ancestral spirits that need to be appeased through the sacrificing of a bull, a sacrifice that costs Mary a substantial amount of money and further contributes to her material poverty. Mary is suffering from not having sufficient income, but her problems cannot be solved by giving her more money or other material resources, for such things are insufficient to heal the brokenness of her four foundational relationships.

Mary's brokenness manifested itself in material poverty, but for other people the effects of these broken relationships are manifested in different ways. For example, for most of my life I have struggled with workaholic tendencies, reflecting a poverty of stewardship, a broken relationship with the rest of creation. Instead of seeing work as simply one of the arenas in which I am to glorify God, there are times in which I have made my work my god and have



tried to find all of my meaning, purpose, and worth through being productive. This is not how God designed humans' relationship with the rest of creation to be. Of course, I am unlikely to experience material poverty, as my high level of productivity will usually put food on my table; however, at times my poverty of stewardship has had serious consequences, including strained relationships with family and friends, physical and emotional ailments resulting from stress, and spiritual weakness from inadequate time for a meaningful devotional life.

The fall really happened, and it is wreaking havoc in all of our lives. We are all broken, just in different ways.

### WHEN HELPING HURTS

One of the major premises of this book is that *until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good*. As discussed earlier, research from around the world has found that shame—a “poverty of being”—is a major part of the brokenness that low-income people experience in their relationship with themselves. Instead of seeing themselves as being created in the image of God, low-income people often feel they are inferior to others. This can paralyze the poor from taking initiative and from seizing opportunities to improve their situation, thereby locking them into material poverty.

At the same time, the economically rich—including most of the readers of this book—also suffer from a poverty of being. In particular, development practitioner Jayakumar Christian argues that the economically rich often have “god-complexes,” a subtle and unconscious sense of superiority in which they believe that they have achieved their wealth through their own efforts and that they have been anointed to decide what is best for low-income people, whom they view as inferior to themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Few of us are conscious of having a god-complex, which is part of the problem. We are often deceived by Satan and by our sinful natures. For example, consider this: why do you want to help the poor? Really think about it. What truly motivates you? Do you really love poor people and want to serve them? Or do you have other motives? I confess to you that part of what motivates me to help the poor is my felt need to accomplish something worthwhile with my life, to be a person of significance, to feel like I have pursued a noble cause . . .

to be a bit like God. It makes me feel good to use my training in economics to "save" poor people. And in the process, I sometimes unintentionally reduce poor people to objects that I use to fulfill my own need to accomplish something. It is a very ugly truth, and it pains me to admit it, but "when I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Rom. 7:21).

And now we have come to a very central point: *one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.* The way that we act toward the economically poor often communicates—albeit unintentionally—that we are superior and they are inferior. In the process we hurt the poor and ourselves. And here is the clincher: this dynamic is likely to be particularly strong whenever middle-to-upper-class, North American Christians try to help the poor, given these Christians' tendency toward a Western, materialistic perspective of the nature of poverty.

This point can be illustrated with the story of Creekside Community Church, a predominantly Caucasian congregation made up of young urban professionals in the downtown area of an American city. Being in the Christmas spirit, Creekside Community Church decided to reach out to the African-American residents of a nearby housing project, which was characterized by high rates of unemployment, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teenage pregnancy. A number of the members of Creekside expressed some disdain for the project residents, and all of the members were fearful of venturing inside. But Pastor Johnson insisted that Jesus cared for the residents of this housing project and that Christmas was the perfect time to show His compassion.

But what could they do to help? Believing that poverty is primarily a lack of material resources—the last row in table 2.1—the members of Creekside Community Church decided to address this poverty by buying Christmas presents for the children in the housing project. Church members went door to door, singing Christmas carols and delivering wrapped toys to the children in each apartment. Although it was awkward at first, the members of Creekside were moved by the big smiles on the children's faces and were encouraged by the warm reception of the mothers. In fact, the congregation felt so good

about the joy they had brought that they decided to expand this ministry, delivering baskets of candy at Easter and turkeys at Thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, after several years, Pastor Johnson noticed that he was struggling to find enough volunteers to deliver the gifts to the housing project. At the congregational meeting, he asked the members why their enthusiasm was waning, but it was difficult to get a clear answer. Finally, one member spoke up: "Pastor, we are tired of trying to help these people out. We have been bringing them things for several years now, but their situation never improves. They just sit there in the same situation year in and year out. Have you ever noticed that there are no men in the apartments when we deliver the toys? The residents are all unwed mothers who just keep having babies in order to collect bigger and bigger welfare checks. They don't deserve our help."

In reality, there was a different reason that there were few men in the apartments when the toys were delivered. Oftentimes, when the fathers of the children heard the Christmas carols outside their front doors and saw the presents for their kids through the peepholes, they were embarrassed and ran out the back doors of their apartments. For a host of reasons, low-income African-American males sometimes struggle to find and keep jobs. This often contributes to a deep sense of shame and inadequacy, both of which make it even more difficult to apply for jobs. The last thing these fathers needed was a group of middle-to-upper-class Caucasians providing Christmas presents for their children, presents that they themselves could not afford to buy. In trying to alleviate material poverty through the giving of these presents, Creekside Community Church increased these fathers' poverty of being. Ironically, this likely made the fathers even less able to apply for a job, thereby exacerbating the very material poverty that Creekside was trying to solve!

In addition to hurting the residents of the housing project, the members of Creekside Community Church hurt themselves. At first the members developed a subtle sense of pride that they were helping the project residents through their acts of kindness. Later, when they observed the residents' failure to improve their situations, the members' disdain for them increased. What is often called "compassion fatigue" then set in as the members became less willing to help the low-income residents. As a result, the poverty of being increased for the church members. Furthermore, the poverty of community

increased for everyone involved, as the gulf between the church members and the housing project residents actually increased as a result of this project.

*Our efforts to help the poor can hurt both them and ourselves.* In fact, as this story illustrates, very often the North American church finds itself locked into the following equation:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc} \text{Material} & & \text{God-complexes} & & \text{Feelings of} & & \text{Harm to Both} \\ \text{Definition} & + & \text{of Materially} & + & \text{Inferiority of} & = & \text{Materially Poor} \\ \text{of Poverty} & & \text{Non-Poor} & & \text{Materially Poor} & & \text{and Non-Poor} \end{array}$$

What can be done to break out of this equation? Changing the first term in this equation requires a revised understanding of the nature of poverty. North American Christians need to overcome the materialism of Western culture and see poverty in more relational terms. Changing the second term in this equation requires ongoing repentance. It requires North American Christians to understand our brokenness and to embrace the message of the cross in deep and profound ways, saying to ourselves every day: "I am not okay; and you are not okay; but Jesus can fix us both." And as we do this, God can use us to change the third term in this equation. By showing low-income people through our words, our actions, and most importantly our ears that they are people with unique gifts and abilities, we can be part of helping them to recover their sense of dignity, even as we recover from our sense of pride.

### **Repenting of the Health-and-Wealth Gospel**

One Sunday I was walking with a staff member through one of Africa's largest slums, the massive Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya. The conditions were simply inhumane. People lived in shacks constructed out of cardboard boxes. Foul smells gushed out of open ditches carrying human and animal excrement. I had a hard time keeping my balance as I continually slipped on oozy brown substances that I hoped were mud but feared were something else. Children picked through garbage dumps looking for anything of value. As we walked deeper and deeper into the slum, my sense of despair increased. *This place is completely God-forsaken*, I thought to myself.

Then to my amazement, right there among the dung, I heard the sound of a familiar hymn. *There must be Western missionaries conducting an open-air ser-*



*vice in here*, I thought to myself. As we turned the corner, my eyes landed on the shack from which the music bellowed. Every Sunday, thirty slum dwellers crammed into this ten-by-twenty foot "sanctuary" to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church was made out of cardboard boxes that had been opened up and stapled to studs. It wasn't pretty, but it was a church, a church made up of some of the poorest people on earth.

When we arrived at the church, I was immediately asked to preach the sermon. As a good Presbyterian, I quickly jotted down some notes about the sovereignty of God and was looking forward to teaching this congregation the historic doctrines of the Reformation. But before the sermon began, the service included a time of sharing and prayer. I listened as some of the poorest people on the planet cried out to God: "Jehovah Jireh, please heal my son, as he is going blind." "Merciful Lord, please protect me when I go home today, for my husband always beats me." "Sovereign King, please provide my children with enough food today, as they are hungry."

As I listened to these people praying to be able to live another day, I thought about my ample salary, my life insurance policy, my health insurance policy, my two cars, my house, etc. I realized that I do not really trust in God's sovereignty on a daily basis, as I have sufficient buffers in place to shield me from most economic shocks. I realized that when these folks pray the fourth petition of the Lord's prayer—*Give us this day our daily bread*—their minds do not wander as mine so often does. I realized that while I have sufficient education and training to deliver a sermon on God's sovereignty with no forewarning, these slum dwellers were trusting in God's sovereignty just to get them through the day. And I realized that these people had a far deeper intimacy with God than I probably will ever have in my entire life.

\* \* \*

Surprisingly, as this story illustrates, for many of us North Americans the first step in overcoming our god-complexes is to repent of the health-and-wealth gospel. At its core, the health-and-wealth gospel teaches that God rewards increasing levels of faith with greater amounts of wealth. When stated this way, the health-and-wealth gospel is easy to reject on a host of biblical grounds. Take the case of the apostle Paul, for example. He had enormous faith

and lived a godly life, but he was shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, naked, and poor.

Think about it. If anybody dares suggest to me that the poor are poor because they are less spiritual than the rest of us—which is what the health-and-wealth gospel teaches—I am quick to rebuke them. I immediately point out that the poor could be poor due to injustices committed against them. Yet, all of this notwithstanding, I was still amazed to see people in this Kenyan slum who were simultaneously so spiritually strong and so devastatingly poor. Right down there in the bowels of hell was this Kenyan church, filled with spiritual giants who were struggling just to eat every day. This shocked me. At some level I had implicitly assumed that my economic superiority goes hand in hand with my spiritual superiority. This is none other than the lie of the health-and-wealth gospel: spiritual maturity leads to financial prosperity.

The health-and-wealth gospel is just one aspect of my “god-complex,” for there are all sorts of areas in which I need to embrace the message of the cross: “I stink, but God loves me anyway!” And without such repentance, my own arrogance is likely to increase the poverty of the materially poor people I encounter by confirming their feelings of shame and inferiority.

That day in the Kibera slum, God used the materially poor, people more visibly broken than I, to teach me about my own brokenness. They blessed me, even while I was trying to bless them.

### **One of These Things Is Not Like the Other**

Although all human beings are poor in the sense that all are suffering from the effects of the fall on the four foundational relationships, it is not legitimate to conclude that there is nothing uniquely devastating about material poverty. Low-income people daily face a struggle to survive that creates feelings of helplessness, anxiety, suffocation, and desperation that are simply unparalleled in the lives of the rest of humanity.

Development expert Robert Chambers argues that the materially poor are trapped by multiple, interconnected factors—insufficient assets, vulnerability, powerlessness, isolation, and physical weakness—that ensnare them like bugs caught in a spider’s web.<sup>17</sup> Imagine being caught in such a web. Every time you try to move, you just get more hung up on another strand. You think to yourself, *Maybe this time will be different*, so you try to make a change in your life. But

immediately you find yourself even more entangled than before. After a while you come to believe that it is better to just lie still. This is miserable, but any further movement only brings even greater misery. You hate your situation, but you have no choice.

Most of the readers of this book do not lead this type of life. We believe that we have choices and that we can make changes, and in our situations, this is a correct assumption. According to Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, it is this lack of freedom to be able to make meaningful choices—to have an ability to affect one's situation—that is the distinguishing feature of poverty.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, while “material poverty” is rooted in the brokenness of the four foundational relationships—a brokenness we all experience in different ways—this does *not* mean that there is nothing unique about “the poor” in Scripture. Although there are places in the Bible in which the term “poor” is used generically to describe the general plight of humanity, there are a host of texts (see chapter 1) in which the term is referring very specifically to those who are economically destitute. We cannot let ourselves off the hook by saying to ourselves, “I am fulfilling the Bible’s commands to help the poor by loving the wealthy lady next door with the troubled marriage.” Yes, this lady is experiencing a “poverty of community,” and it is good to help her. But this is not the type of person referred to in such passages as 1 John 3:17.

The economically poor are singled out in Scripture as being in a particularly desperate category and as needing very specific attention (Acts 6:1–7). The fact that all of humanity has some things in common with the materially poor does not negate their unique and overwhelming suffering nor the special place that they have in God’s heart, as emphasized throughout the Old and New Testaments.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

*Please write responses to the following:*

1. Reflect on your relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. List specific things that you would like to see improved in your four key relationships.

2. Read Romans 5:6–11. To what extent do you embrace the message of the cross: God Almighty died for you while you were still His “enemy”? How worthy are you of God’s love expressed through Jesus Christ?
3. In what ways do you suffer from a “god-complex,” the belief that you are superior to others and are well-positioned to determine what is best for them? If you have this problem, what specific steps can you take to change this?
4. What really motivates you to want to help materially poor people?
5. Think about the approach of your church or your ministry to materially poor people. Is there any evidence of a god-complex?
6. Think back to a situation in which you have tried to minister to others. In what ways did your approach help both you and them to overcome a poverty of spiritual intimacy, a poverty of being, a poverty of community, and a poverty of stewardship? In what ways did your approach actually contribute to greater “poverty” in the four relationships for both you and them?
7. Now answer question 6 for your church by reflecting on the type of ministries that your church pursues and the manner in which it pursues them.
8. Think back to your answers to the question at the start of this chapter: *What is poverty?* Compare your answers to the answers that the poor themselves give. What differences do you see?
9. Do you have a “material definition of poverty”? If so, how has this influenced the way that you have approached ministry to the poor? What harm might this have done?
10. Are you or your church locked into the equation mentioned in this chapter (see p. 64)? If so, what steps can you take to break out of it?

PART

2

**GENERAL PRINCIPLES**  
*for* **HELPING**  
**WITHOUT HURTING**



## INITIAL THOUGHTS

Please write short answers to the following questions:

- 1. Think about materially poor people in North America who have asked you or your church for immediate financial assistance. Under what conditions do you believe it would be appropriate to give things or money to these people? Be specific.*
- 2. Think about any ministry to the poor that you or your church has conducted in the Majority World; for example, a short-term mission trip. Under what conditions do you believe it would be appropriate for you or your church to give things or money to these people? Be specific.*
- 3. Are your answers to the previous two questions the same or different? Why?*

# NOT ALL **POVERTY** IS CREATED EQUAL

**Y**ou turn on the evening news and see that a tsunami has devastated Indonesia, leaving millions without food, adequate clothing, or shelter. Following a commercial break, the news returns and features a story about the growing number of homeless men in your city, who are also without food, adequate clothing, or shelter. At first glance the appropriate responses to each of these crises might seem to be very similar. The people in both situations need food, clothing, and housing, and providing these things to both groups seems to be the obvious solution. But there is something nagging in us as we reflect on these two news stories. Deep down it seems like the people in these two crises are in very different situations and require different types of help.

How should we think about these scenarios? Are there principles to guide us to the appropriate response in each case?

## **PICK A NUMBER BETWEEN 1 AND 3**

A helpful first step in thinking about working with the poor in any context is to discern whether the situation calls for relief, rehabilitation, or development. In fact, the failure to distinguish among these situations is one of the most common reasons that poverty-alleviation efforts often do harm.

“Relief” can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency

aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. As pictured in figure 4.1, when a crisis such as the Indonesian tsunami strikes at point 1, people are nearly or even completely helpless and experience plummeting economic conditions. There is a need to halt the free fall, to “stop the bleeding,” and this is what relief attempts to do. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance—often material—to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time. The Good Samaritan’s bandaging of the helpless man who lay bleeding along the roadside is an excellent example of relief applied appropriately.

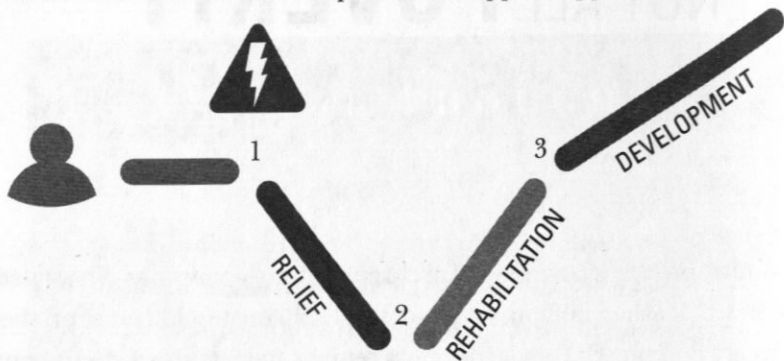


FIGURE 4.1

“Rehabilitation” begins as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their precrisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working *with* the tsunami victims as they participate in their own recovery, moving from point 2 to point 3.

“Development” is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved—both the “helpers” and the “helped”—closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In particular, as the materially poor develop, they are better able to fulfill their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruits of that work. Development is not done *to* people or *for* people but *with* people. The key dynamic in development is promoting an empowering process in which all the people involved—both the “helpers” and the “helped”—become more of what God created them to be, moving beyond point 3 to levels of reconciliation that they have not experienced before.



It is absolutely crucial that we determine whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is the appropriate intervention:

**One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make—by far—is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention.**

The Good Samaritan's handouts were appropriate for the person at point 1, a victim who needed material assistance to stop the bleeding and even prevent death; however, the person at point 3 is not facing an emergency, and handouts of material assistance to such people do not help to restore them to being the productive stewards that they were created to be. In fact, as we saw in chapter 2, applying a material solution to the person at point 3, whose underlying problem—like ours—is relational, is likely to do harm to this person and to the provider of the material assistance, exacerbating the brokenness in the four key relationships for both of them.

The remainder of this chapter uses the relief-rehabilitation-development paradigm to flesh out some principles as we seek the goal of poverty alleviation—low-income people and ourselves increasingly glorifying God through reconciling relationships with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

### **Who's #1?**

Many of the people coming to your church for help will state that they are in a crisis, needing emergency financial help for utility bills, rent, food, or transportation. In other words, they will state that they are at point 1 in figure 4.1. Is relief the appropriate intervention for such a person? Maybe, but maybe not. There are several things to consider.

First, is there really a crisis at hand? If you fail to provide immediate help, will there really be serious, negative consequences? If not, then relief is not the appropriate intervention, for there is time for the person to take actions on his own behalf.

Second, to what degree was the individual personally responsible for the crisis? Of course, compassion and understanding are in order here, especially when one remembers the systemic factors that can play a role in poverty. But

it is still important to consider the person's own culpability in the situation, as allowing people to feel some of the pain resulting from any irresponsible behavior on their part can be part of the "tough love" needed to facilitate the reconciliation of poverty alleviation. The point is not to punish the person for any mistakes or sins he has committed but to ensure that the appropriate lessons are being learned in the situation.

Third, can the person help himself? If so, then a pure handout is almost never appropriate, as it undermines the person's capacity to be a steward of his own resources and abilities.

Fourth, to what extent has this person already been receiving relief from you or others in the past? How likely is he to be receiving such help in the future? As special as your church is, it might not be the first stop on the train! This person may be obtaining "emergency" assistance from one church or organization after another, so that your "just-this-one-time gift" might be the tenth such gift the person has recently received.

My family experienced this situation two months ago when a young woman knocked on the door of our house asking for some food. We complied, but we later found out that she had received similar assistance from other members of our community for many weeks, and we still see her going door-to-door asking for food. When neighbors have sought to provide her with long-term solutions, she has refused such help. The loving thing to do for this woman is for the entire community to withhold further relief, to explain our reason for doing so, and to offer her wide-open arms should she choose a path of walking together with us in finding long-term solutions.

While many of these rules of thumb strike an intuitive chord when working with the materially poor in North America, many of us ignore these principles when working with the materially poor in the Majority World. Compared to our own situation, the levels of poverty in the Majority World seem so devastating, and the people seem so helpless. In such contexts, many of us are quick to hand out money and other forms of relief assistance in ways that we would never even consider when ministering to the poor in North America.

To illustrate, consider the savings and credit association affiliated with Jehovah Jireh Church, a congregation located in a slum in Manila, the Philippines. Each of the members of this savings and credit association lives on

approximately one to five dollars per day. Each member of the association deposits into the group just twenty cents per week, which the association uses to make very small, interest-bearing loans to the members. In addition, each member contributes five cents per week to the association's emergency fund, which can be used to provide relief to members facing an emergency crisis.

From a North American perspective, these people are extremely poor. In this light, it is instructive to consider the policies that the savings and credit association developed for its emergency fund. Money from the fund is lent—not given—at a 0 percent interest rate to group members whose family members get sick. No assistance is available for people who have had their electricity or water cut off for not paying their utility bills. According to the group, such a situation does not constitute an emergency, since electric and water bills are regular household expenditures for which they should all be prepared. The group will not even give emergency loans for hospitalization for giving birth, because the family had nine months to prepare for the delivery of the baby. Finally, the amount of the loan from the emergency fund is limited to the amount of the savings contributions of the member getting the loan. The members of this savings and credit association are tough cookies!

Now what happens when a North American church encounters the members of Jehovah Jireh Church's savings and credit association? We often project our own ideas of what is an acceptable standard of living onto the situation and are quick to take a relief approach, doling out money in ways that the local people would consider unwise and dependence-creating. And in the process, we can undermine local judgment, discipline, accountability, stewardship, savings, and institutions. In fact, research has shown that the injection of outside funds into these savings and credit groups typically dooms them to collapse.<sup>1</sup> The point here is not that the policies of Jehovah Jireh's savings and credit association are normative for all churches and all contexts. The point is that, in deciding if relief is the appropriate intervention, we must be careful lest we impose our own cultural assumptions into contexts that we do not understand very well.

As discussed further in chapter 11, assessment tools can help you to discern the nature of a person's situation. These tools can range from an informal set of questions used in an initial conversation to a more formal and detailed

written form. Such assessment tools help to identify the type of assistance that would be most beneficial and can also help to determine if the need for help is real. Furthermore, these tools can reveal the willingness of the person to address larger life issues that may have contributed to the present situation.

In particular, it is helpful for your church or ministry to have a set of benevolence policies in place to guide decision making when working with materially poor people. These policies should flow from your mission and vision and be consistent with a biblical perspective on the nature of poverty and its alleviation.

Who is #1? It is unlikely that you know many people in this category, for the reality is that only a small percentage of the poor in your community or around the world require relief. These would include the severely disabled; some of the elderly; very young, orphaned children; the mentally ill homeless population; and victims of a natural disaster. People in these categories are often unable to do anything to help themselves and need the handouts of relief. However, for most people, the bleeding has stopped, and they are not destitute. Acting as though they are destitute does more harm than good, both to them and to ourselves. This does not mean that we should do nothing to help those who are not destitute. It just means that rehabilitation or development—not relief—is the appropriate way of helping such people. This help could very well include providing them with financial assistance, but such assistance would be conditional upon and supportive of their being productive. Chapters 8 and 9 provide examples of interventions that do this by complementing people's work and thrift with additional resources.

### **How Do You Spell "Effective Relief"?**

If you do determine that relief is the appropriate response in a given situation, there are some principles that can help to make your relief efforts more effective.

First, relief needs to be immediate. If a person is in the midst of a crisis and cannot help himself, a timely response is crucial. For example, when a large-scale natural disaster hits, the victims cannot wait weeks while churches try to think of what they should do and secure funding. What is true for large-scale disasters is true for the battered woman who has bravely come to the church



office seeking safe shelter. Sending her back home to wait while the church tries to find her some alternative shelter is not a good relief response.

In order to provide timely relief, it is important to engage in disaster preparedness. This simply means looking ahead and forecasting the types of relief situations that the church or ministry may encounter. Financial, material, and human resources can be identified and secured to be ready to be put into play at the right time. For example, the deacons can ensure that the church either obtains or creates a directory of services that are available in the community to address relief needs. The deacons can also line up people within the congregation who would be ready to give of themselves to help someone who is in the midst of a crisis. Such help could include opening their home for a few nights, providing transportation to an agency, taking a person out to eat, or working in the church's clothing closet to ensure it is well organized.

Second, relief is also temporary, provided only during the time that people are unable to help themselves. Unfortunately, determining when to stop relief is never easy. On the one hand, we can make the mistake of ending our assistance too early. An uninsured family facing ongoing medical bills due to a health emergency may need more than a single gift of one hundred dollars from the church's benevolence fund. On the other hand, if relief is given for too long, it can do harm by creating dependence. Again, your church needs to have benevolence policies in place that define the degree, frequency, and length of relief efforts. While there may be occasions that call for working outside of these policies, having such policies can greatly aid in providing relief appropriately.

How do you spell "effective relief"? S-e-l-d-o-m, I-m-m-e-d-i-a-t-e, and T-e-m-p-o-r-a-r-y.

### **Doing Relief and Rehabilitation, Developmentally**

Once relief efforts have stopped the bleeding, it is time to move quickly into rehabilitation, working *with*, not *for*, people to help them return to the positive elements of their precrisis conditions. Again, rehabilitation must be done in a way consistent with the long-run goal of poverty alleviation: low-income people and ourselves increasingly glorifying God through reconciling relationships

with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

About twenty years ago, my wife and I helped to mobilize our church to volunteer at a Christian homeless shelter. Most of the men living in the shelter had experienced some sort of trauma such as a divorce, a death in the family, or the loss of a job. Turning to drugs or alcohol to ease the pain, these men had lost everything and needed emergency help to survive in the frigid conditions of the Connecticut winter. By providing food and warm beds, the shelter had stopped the downward plunge for these men and was now trying to help them to rehabilitate through a range of counseling services.

Once a month the members of our church graciously bought food, prepared a meal, served it to the shelter residents, and cleaned up afterward. We did everything short of spoon-feeding the men, never asking them to lift a finger in the entire process. A more developmental approach would have sought greater participation of these men in their own rehabilitation, asking them to exercise stewardship as part of the process of beginning to reconcile their key relationships. We could have involved the men every step along the way, from planning the meal, to shopping for the food, to helping with serving and clean-up. We could have done supper *with* the men, working and eating side by side, rather than giving supper *to* the men, engaging in a provider-recipient dynamic that likely confirmed our sense of superiority and their sense of inferiority.

Doing rehabilitation and even relief using a more developmental approach is now considered the "best practice" in the field. For example, the *Minimum Standards of Disaster and Rehabilitation Assistance* includes the following guidelines, to which we've added some comments.<sup>2</sup>

- ***Ensure participation of the affected population in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the assistance program.*** This is the equivalent of saying that the men in the homeless shelter need to be involved in every aspect of not just preparing supper, but in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the entire homeless shelter's programs! Does this sound crazy? Clearly, judgment is necessary to determine the capacity of the target population to make wise decisions and to shoulder responsibilities. But it is important to work from a perspective that we are all created in the image of God, that we are all broken, and that we all can experience Christ's reconciliation. As much as possible, we need to treat people as the responsible

stewards that we want them to be, even asking their opinions once in a while! Homeless men might actually know something about, well, being homeless.

- ***Conduct an initial assessment to provide an understanding of the disaster situation and to determine the nature of the response.*** This is a little different from loading up a truck of volunteers from your church and running down to New Orleans the day after the levees break. It requires you to know the local context and situation or to be working under the auspices and coordination of those who do.

- ***Respond when needs of an affected population are unmet by local people or organizations due to their inability or unwillingness to help.*** Note how cautious this approach is. If local people and organizations are able and willing to help those in the crisis, then stay away! The local people will typically have a better understanding of the best way to get the job done. Moreover, the entire goal of development work is for local people to take charge of their individual lives and communities. Rushing in with all sorts of outside knowledge and resources can undermine the four key relationships in that community, one of which is being a steward of “the rest of creation.” If they need help, give it; but if they do not, your giving may do harm.

From a biblical perspective, we need to qualify this “best practice” guideline a bit. Whenever possible, the first responders to a crisis should be the victims’ family members, whether those family members are geographically local or not (1 Tim. 5:3–4). However, in many relief situations there is not sufficient time to involve the family members, particularly if they live far away from the crisis. In such situations, the geographically local people should become the first responders.

- ***Target assistance based on vulnerability and need, and provide it equitably and impartially.*** Note the concern here with precision, making sure that the people who get the assistance are truly vulnerable and needy. Flinging resources around undermines the development of individual and communal stewardship, responsibility, and capacity. The women in the savings and credit association of Jehovah Jireh Church understood this quite well.

- ***Aid workers must possess appropriate qualifications, attitudes, and experience to plan and effectively implement appropriate assistance programs.*** Note the concern here is with both ability and attitude. There are complex disaster situations in

which untrained volunteers are more of a hindrance than a help, particularly when they are not working under the auspices of an experienced organization. Again, jumping in a truck and heading down to New Orleans during a major disaster might do more harm than good. And an attitude of humility and brokenness is everything. The provider-receiver dynamic in the relief situation lends itself to all of the problems we have discussed concerning the god-complexes of the providers interacting with the recipients' feeling of inferiority. And the dangers are even greater in rehabilitation contexts in which the recipients have the capacity to participate in their own recovery. In such settings, top-down, "I-am-here-to-save-you" attitudes can seriously undermine the development of the recipients' initiative and stewardship.

### **Bad Relief Undermines Worship**

The sprawling Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, is believed to be the largest slum in Africa. Development workers commonly refer to Kibera as "scorched earth," because decades of well-meaning outside organizations have made it nearly impossible to do long-lasting development work there. Failing to recognize that the appropriate intervention in Kibera is neither relief nor rehabilitation, outside organizations have poured in financial and human resources, crippling local initiative in the process. Alvin Mbola, a Kenyan community development worker who tries to build up the indigenous churches in Kibera, describes the situation as follows:

To many people, the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya is a place with no equals. It is filthy, congested, degraded, and unfit for human habitation. Like the proverbial scriptural reference to the birthplace of Jesus Christ, many people believe that "nothing good can come out of Kibera." Therefore, most remedies directed toward Kibera are motivated by the sympathy of outsiders, who often give handouts in an attempt to cushion the residents against their perceived, gigantic problems.

In reality, many of the problems of Kibera stem from chronic issues that can only be solved through a consistent and long-term relationship between the change agent and the residents. Changes within individuals and communities are not instantaneous; long-term relationships are needed to bring out the best of "what is" and of "what could be." The people in Kibera have capaci-



ties, skills, and resources that need to be tapped if genuine development is to be realized, but the process of identifying and mobilizing these gifts and assets takes time. Unfortunately, for many years nongovernment organizations working in Kibera have tended to operate on the basis of "quick fixes." Frustrations set in because changes in individuals are not forthcoming as quickly as anticipated. Many of these organizations then either close down or move to other parts of the country, leaving people in a worse situation than they were before. In the process, individual and community lives have been devastated. It appears that many donors are willing to give to any venture as long as they see pictures of "dilapidated" Kibera. . . .

Of course, there are some occasions in which there is a need for relief work in Kibera. For example, often times there are fire breakouts where houses and business premises are gutted down. It might be necessary to bring in outside resources to provide relief and to rehabilitate these homes and businesses. But even in these situations, caution should be taken so that the relief efforts are not prolonged to the point in which they undermine local people's stewardship of their own lives and communities.

The root issue in all of these considerations is that God, who is a worker, ordained work so that humans could worship Him through their work. Relief efforts applied inappropriately often cause the beneficiaries to abstain from work, thereby limiting their relationship with God through distorted worship or through no worship at all.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE POISON OF PATERNALISM**

Are you feeling overwhelmed yet? Poverty alleviation is more complex than it appears at first glance. However, there is a good rule of thumb that is extremely useful in cutting through a lot of the complexity: Avoid Paternalism.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Avoid Paternalism.**

**Do not do things for people that they can do for themselves.**

Memorize this, recite it under your breath all day long, and wear it like a garland around your neck. Every time you are engaged in poverty-alleviation ministry, keep this at the forefront of your mind, for it can keep you

from doing all sorts of harm.

Paternalism comes in a variety of forms:

### **Resource Paternalism**

Resource paternalism has been discussed in this book at some length already. Being from a materialistic culture, North Americans often view the solution to poverty in material terms and tend to pour financial and other material resources into situations in which the real need is for the local people to steward their own resources. In addition, legitimate local businesses can be undermined when outsiders bring in such things as free clothes or building supplies, undercutting the price that these local businesses need to survive.

### **Spiritual Paternalism**

Spiritual paternalism has also been discussed earlier. Many of us assume that we have a lot to teach the materially poor about God and that we should be the ones preaching from the pulpit, teaching the Sunday school class, or leading the vacation Bible school. We do have much to share out of our knowledge and experiences, but oftentimes the materially poor have an even deeper walk with God and have insights and experiences that they can share with us, if we would just stop talking and listen.

### **Knowledge Paternalism**

Knowledge paternalism occurs when we assume that we have all the best ideas about how to do things. As a result, the materially poor need us to think for them concerning the best way to plant crops, to operate their businesses, or to cure diseases. Handling knowledge is a very tricky area in poverty alleviation, because the truth is that we often do have knowledge that can help the materially poor. But we must recognize that the materially poor also have unique insights into their own cultural contexts and are facing circumstances that we do not understand very well.

For example, during the first several decades after World War II, the leading Western economists and agriculturalists concluded that peasant farmers in the Majority World were irrational and culturally backward because the farmers failed to adopt new varieties of crops that had higher average yields. Subsequent research discovered that the farmers were, indeed, acting very

rationally. While the new crop varieties had higher average yields, these new crops also had much greater variation in their yields from year to year than the farmers' traditional varieties. For farmers living in highly vulnerable situations in which a bad crop could result in starvation for their children, it was better to choose the low-risk-low-return traditional varieties than the high-risk-high-return new varieties, particularly in a setting in which landlords and loan sharks tended to reap the majority of any increase in profits.<sup>5</sup> The failure of the outside "experts" to understand the realities of life on the ground led them to give life-threatening advice to the materially poor and then to demean the poor when they failed to listen to this "expert" advice.

All of us need to remember that the materially poor really are created in the image of God and have the ability to think and to understand the world around them. They actually know something about their situation, and we need to listen to them! This does not need to degenerate into some sort of new-age, "the-truth-is-within-you" quagmire. Like all of us, the materially poor are often wrong about how the world works and can benefit from the knowledge of others. In fact, a key trigger point for change in a community is often being exposed to a new way of understanding or of doing something. But it is reflective of a god-complex to assume that we have all the knowledge and that we always know what is best.

Knowledge paternalism may be a particular temptation for Christian businesspeople from North America, many of whom are showing considerable passion for using their God-given abilities to train low-income entrepreneurs in the Majority World. This passion is a wonderful development and has enormous potential to advance Christ's kingdom around the world. But the fact that a person successfully operates a software company in Boston does not ensure that this person has the best business advice for a highly vulnerable cassava farmer living on one dollar per day in the semi-feudal institutional setting of rural Guatemala. Humility, caution, and an open ear are in order.

Similarly, pastors of middle-to-upper-class North American churches may be susceptible to knowledge paternalism, making the mistake of thinking that their own ministry styles are normative for all cultural settings. Churches of different socioeconomic classes even within North America differ dramatically in terms of the ways that they handle money, prayer, sermons, staffing,

music, membership, counseling, etc. For example, in a lower-class church, prayers tend to be participatory, with individual members praying for God to heal specific problems that they are having. In contrast, in middle-class churches the pastor tends to offer the prayers, asking God more generally to "help those who are sick." Finally, in wealthy churches, prayers are often done through highly stylized liturgy.<sup>6</sup>

Wherever the Bible speaks specifically about church life, it must be heeded. But where the Bible is silent, North American pastors must be careful not to impose their own culturally determined ministry styles into settings in which the local pastors might know more about the most effective way to minister.

### **Labor Paternalism**

Labor paternalism occurs when we do work for people that they can do for themselves. I remember going on a spring break mission trip to Mississippi while I was in college. I will never forget the sick feeling I had as I stood on a ladder painting a house while the young, able-bodied men living in the house sat on their front porch and watched. I did so much harm that day. Yes, the house got painted, but in the process I undermined these people's calling to be stewards of their own time and talents. It might have been better if I had stayed home for spring break, rather than to have gone and done harm.

### **Managerial Paternalism**

Managerial paternalism is perhaps the hardest nut to crack. We middle-to-upper-class North Americans love to see things get done as quickly and efficiently as possible. Relative to many other cultures, including many low-income communities in North America, we are prone to take charge, particularly when it appears that nobody else is moving fast enough. As a result, we often plan, manage, and direct initiatives in low-income communities when people in those communities could do these things quite well already. The structure and pace might be different if the low-income communities undertook the projects themselves, but they could do a good job nonetheless.

You might be asking, "Then why don't they take charge and manage these projects if they are so gifted?" There are lots of reasons that the people, churches, and organizations in low-income communities might not take charge, but here



are several common ones that should give us some pause before rushing into a low-income community and grabbing the reins in any project:

- They do not need to take charge because they know that we will take charge if they wait long enough.
- They lack the confidence to take charge, particularly when the "superior," middle-to-upper-class North Americans are involved.
- They, like we, have internalized the messages of centuries of colonialism, slavery, and racism: Caucasians run things and everyone else follows.
- They do not want the project to happen as much as we do. For example, they might know the project will accomplish little in their context but are afraid to tell us for fear of offending us.
- They know that by letting us run the show it is more likely that we will bring in money and other material resources to give to them.

There are situations in which a lack of local leadership and managerial ability may require the outsiders to perform these functions, but we should be very, very cognizant of our tendencies as middle-to-upper-class North Americans to take charge and run things. Remember, the goal is not to *produce* houses or other material goods but to pursue a *process* of walking with the materially poor so that they are better stewards of their lives and communities, including their own material needs.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule! There are times when the Holy Spirit might move us to do something for the materially poor that they can do for themselves. But just remember that these situations are the exception, not the rule. Avoid paternalism.

### **FINDING YOUR NICHE**

It is extremely difficult for the same person or organization to provide relief, rehabilitation, *and* development, for the relational dynamics in each of these types of ministry are quite different. For example, if your church is known as the place to go for free food (relief), it might have difficulty convincing people that they need to start working to earn their daily bread (development). In addition, each of these ministries is demanding. If a church tries to do all of them, it runs the risk of being spread too thin. Hence,



it might be better for your church to focus on relief, rehabilitation, *or* development.

How do you decide? Determine the sorts of services that are already being provided by organizations in the community in which you want to serve. Next, find out both the assets and the needs of the materially poor in your community. Are the people destitute, or can they contribute to their own improvement? In many if not most instances, you will find that the materially poor in your community are not in a free fall; that is, they are not in need of relief.

Ironically, you will also typically find that most existing organizations in your community are focusing on providing relief. Why? There are at least three reasons. First, many service organizations have a material definition of poverty; hence, they believe that handouts of material things are the solution to that poverty. As a result, they often provide relief to people who really need development. Second, relief is easier to do than development. It is much simpler to drop food out of airplanes or to ladle soup out of bowls than it is to develop long-lasting, time-consuming relationships with poor people, which may be emotionally exhausting. Third, it is easier to get donor money for relief than for development. "We fed a thousand people today" sounds better to donors than "We hung out and developed relationships with a dozen people today."

In this light, your church might decide to find a niche in development, choosing to focus on ministering intensely over time to a few people rather than superficially and quickly to many people. Indeed, many churches are well-placed in terms of mission, programmatic focus, financial resources, relational skills, and basic giftedness for the long and sometimes grinding haul required for development work. After all, the church is designed by Christ Himself to be all about developing and growing people through long-term discipleship!<sup>7</sup>

If your church chooses a development niche, it might want to put in its benevolence policies that no more than, say, 10 percent of the benevolence fund will normally be used for relief work, with the other 90 percent going toward development. Your church should also keep a list of organizations that do offer relief and rehabilitation in your community in case you encounter people who actually need it. In compiling such a list, you might try to discern which organizations do relief and rehabilitation "developmentally" so that you can feel confident about referring people to them.

Not all poverty is created equal; hence, there is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Take the time to find the niche that is right for your church and your community.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

*Please write responses to the following:*

1. Reflect back on your answers to the "Initial Thoughts" questions at the start of this chapter. Is there anything you would now like to change about those answers? Be specific.
2. Think about the materially poor people in North America whom your church or ministry is trying to help. Do these people need relief, rehabilitation, or development? Is your church or ministry pursuing the right strategy for these people? If not, what harm might you be doing to these people and to yourselves? What changes could you make to improve your approach?
3. Think about the materially poor people in the Majority World whom your church or ministry is trying to help. Do these people need relief, rehabilitation, or development? Is your church or ministry pursuing the right strategy for these people? If not, what harm might you be doing to these people and to yourselves? What changes could you make to improve your approach?
4. Are you, your church, or your ministry being paternalistic in any of your poverty-alleviation efforts? If so, what could you do to change this?
5. Think about the organizations to which you are donating money. Are they pursuing relief, rehabilitation, or development appropriately? If you do not know, then try to find out by examining their literature, exploring their website, or asking them some questions.
6. Make a list of all the organizations that minister to the materially poor in your community. Determine the exact services that they provide and whether they are doing relief, rehabilitation, or development. To which organizations would you feel comfortable referring people? Keep this information handy for your church or ministry to use.

7. If you have relationships with the materially poor in your target community, conduct a focus group discussion to determine their assets and needs. Try to discern if relief, rehabilitation, or development is most needed in this community. What specific services are lacking?
8. Reflect on the information you have gathered in questions 6 and 7. What seems to be the best niche for your church or ministry?